

National WILDLIFE

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1973

DEDICATED TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF OUR ENVIRONMENT • PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION



Who will save Never-Never Land?



BY VANCE H. SCOTT, PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT B. EVANS

WHEN AUTUMN'S NORTH WINDS whip the Santa Barbara passage into a frothy, white brine, few places are more remote, more intriguing, than California's Channel Islands. Abandoned to transient sea birds and the tides, these eight wilderness sentinels are a nostalgic taste of early California.

Development has been slight on most of the Channel Islands and almost nonexistent on the five northern isles. The unspoiled beauty of these particular islands qualifies

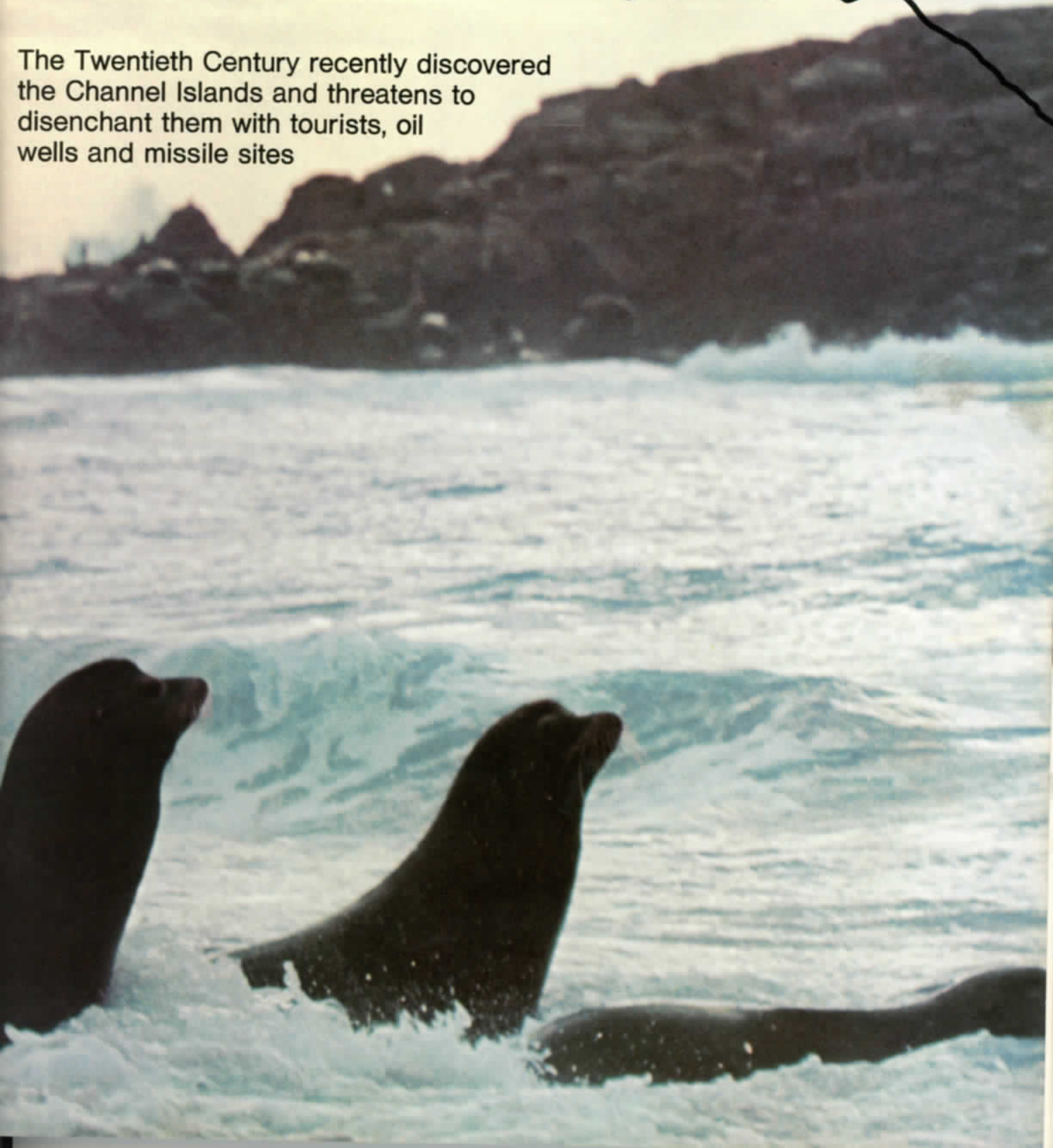
them as the last outposts in the western United States for refugee sea life that can no longer survive near the mainland because of ubiquitous coastal development.

Located from ten to sixty miles offshore, the Channel Islands were once part of the rambling Santa Monica coastal mountain range until intervening seas inundated all but the highest summits about one million years ago. Since then, isolation has encouraged a unique evolutionary process with distinct life forms common to almost every island. Biologists have cataloged over eighty plant species unknown to the mainland. Archaeologists have





The Twentieth Century recently discovered the Channel Islands and threatens to disenchant them with tourists, oil wells and missile sites



recovered a wealth of information indicating the presence of early man as many as 30,000 years ago. And geologists frequently visit the spectacular sea caves and curious sandstone creations etched by years of wind and water erosion.

Historically, man has been a relative stranger to these isles and his absence has been credited, at least in part, for their natural preservation. For years the islands remained unnoticed except for legends of illicit activities. Tales of sunken treasures and smuggled fortunes fill the romantic island history, but all that has been found thus far is an ominous burial ground of broken ships which once foundered in the channel's notoriously heavy fog. At the turn of the century human cargoes of Chinese peasants were smuggled onto the islands and later ferried ashore to supply inexpensive railroad labor. During Prohibition, bootleggers cached their merchandise on the islands.

Today, the Channel Islands remain much as they were when Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo discovered them more than four centuries ago. Several are privately owned and primarily operated as ranches. Some are military possessions used for weapons testing. Two are national monuments within the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. Only Santa Catalina Island, a popular summer resort, has seen any substantial development.

But all may not be well in paradise. Already a massive resort development is in the planning stages on one of the islands. Scientists complain that valuable archaeologic sites have been damaged by intruders. And conservationists are angered by the frequent shooting of island sea mammals by commercial fishermen. Several conservation leagues are concerned that the Channel Islands may be rapidly approaching the end of an era.

Anacapa Island was the first to register the effects of man. Geographically,

Anacapa is three island segments linked by a narrow, submerged stretch of rock and sand; the water above is too shallow to navigate. In 1938, Anacapa and Santa Barbara Islands were set aside as national monuments when severe overgrazing by flocks of feral sheep nearly stripped the islands bare. For more than two decades unauthorized visitation of either island was forbidden, but since the restriction was lifted they have become increasingly popular with area yachtsmen.

One of the last known breeding grounds of the rare brown pelican, Anacapa puzzled scientists in 1970, when records showed a spiraling decline in the pelican birthrate. Subsequent research revealed the tragic side-effects of the chemical pesticide DDT on the bird's life cycle. A search of pelican rookeries showed hundreds of eggs had become so weakened by the mothers' ingestion of the substance that they had cracked under the females' weight. In 1970, only



a single pelican hatching was recorded on the entire island. (A year later there were seven recorded hatchings and in 1972 some 31 infants were counted; reasons for the increase are not fully understood.)

Far to the south, tiny Santa Barbara Island has suffered less misfortune than its sister monument, probably because its sixty-mile distance from the mainland affords a kind of natural immunity. Treacherous palisades surround much of the 650-acre island, discouraging most from going ashore. Its small size gives Santa Barbara Island the appearance of an oversized rock, the kind that famous comic book characters get marooned on. Except here there are no whispering palm trees or enchanting mermaids. About the most exotic survivor on this barren isle is the giant coreopsis, a bizarre, ungainly cousin of the sunflower also found on Anacapa and in scattered groves along the mainland coast.

Those who know the islands consider



California sea lions, pages 40-41, swim off San Miguel Island in the seclusion of submerged reefs and jagged shoals. **Zoologists** regard San Miguel's 24-mile-long coastline the most significant rookery of its kind in the United States for sea lions and for the elephant seal, far left, a female. **The Anacapa Island chain**, left, is becoming increasingly popular with area yachtsmen. **Sea birds** like the western sea gull, top, break the silence of San Miguel Island. Colorful wild Succulent flowers, center, grace Anacapa Island. **The baby western sea gull** hiding in the shadow of a rock on Anacapa Island has a long way to go before it attains the independence of that other sea gull, Jonathan Livingston.

The nearly extinct sea otter visits San Miguel Island, and the fur seal has recently established a breeding ground there

Santa Cruz the jewel of the channel group. It is the largest of the islands with some 65 miles of virgin coastline pierced by tranquil coves and sea caves, the largest of which snakes a course deep into the underground with a ceiling nearly seventy feet high. Painted Cave takes its name from the brilliant splash of lichens, mosses and mineral deposits that lace the cavern walls.

Second largest Santa Rosa Island looms across a short but often turbulent channel between Santa Cruz and San Miguel Islands. Its 45-mile coastline is a fortress of steep palisades girded by offshore gardens of thick, *Nereocystean* kelp. Submerged reefs and jagged shoals keep prospective wanderers at a comfortable distance and provide seclusion for seal and sea lion rookeries.

The wrinkled interior is a series of folding ravines and canyons gouged deep into the terrain, with occasional sand dunes that spill into the sea. This rugged country yields a rare collection

of unique island flora and fauna. One of the only two groves of torrey pines in the world stands here, along with a variety of oaks and a sprinkling of island pines. Most of the island is carpeted by tall, swaying grasses where scattered numbers of the imported tule elk, Kaibab deer and Siberian snow deer graze freely. It was on Santa Rosa Island that archaeologists uncovered the charred bones of the dwarf mammoth, suggesting early man may have inhabited this island as many as 30,000 years ago.

Like neighboring Santa Cruz Island, Santa Rosa is also privately owned and primarily devoted to ranching. At present, both islands remain secure in the hands of their owners, but conservationists emphasize that tradition is no guarantee against change. A legal showdown between stalwart ecologists and persistent landowners appears imminent. At stake is the islands' future, as either sleepy pasture lands or resort developments.

Ecologists had been concerned for years, but it wasn't until 1965, when plans for a tourist spa on Santa Cruz Island were disclosed, that conservationists lodged their first active appeal for formal protection. The proposed development features two villages, completely self-sufficient and capable of sustaining an ultimate community of 3,000 permanent residents, complete with a 200-boat marina, an airfield and an 18-hole golf course. Scorpion Canyon would be dredged for nearly one-half mile to create a European-style fjord.

The island's future remains in a state of legal limbo pending litigation over California's recent Coastline Preservation Act. Under this law, all proposed coastal development, public and private, must be reviewed by a commission to determine environmental impact.

That same California law has breathed new life into a campaign seeking to suspend oil drilling permits for Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz Islands. Such drilling



has already destroyed several Indian burial sites on Santa Rosa Island.

Less controversial, but not without its problems, windblown San Miguel Island crouches against the horizon far from its nearest neighbor. Many of its visitors have come by chance, not choice, and some probably wish they had never come at all. Fate has been a cruel guardian of this melancholy isle where ghostly spirits of shipwrecked sailors haunt its jagged shoals. Civilizations of Indians have also perished here and lie buried in the islands' fifty known gravesites. But probably the most tragic account of life on San Miguel is the legend of the Herbert Lester family.

Herbert Lester had the restless spirit of a pioneer. Disillusioned by World War I and the pace of modern life, he moved with his wife to San Miguel, where he hoped to find the wilderness retreat of his dreams. For about twenty years the island was his personal Never-Never Land. Occasional visitors created



Spirits of shipwrecked sailors haunt the jagged shoals of Point Bennett, San Miguel Island, left. **About sixty species** of rockfish occur on the Pacific coast, including the kelp rockfish, top left. **Starfish**, top right, is really not a fish at all since it has no backbone. A more colorful rockfish photographed off Santa Rosa Island is the whitebelly rockfish, center. **Sea fan**, lower left, is an animal related to coral and has thousands of tiny polyps that expand to feed on plankton. **Leaflike respiratory** projections along the back of the nudibranch, lower right, mimic seaweed fronds. The Santa Barbara offshore oil blow-out four years ago killed some sea animals, and long-range effects are not yet known.

Changes on the islands themselves have been rapid and highly visible; inevitably, land development also affects the rich undersea life



Some conservationists want National Park status for the island chain, but no one can ensure that nature-loving tourists won't destroy the fragile ecosystem

a reputation for him on the mainland as "the king of San Miguel."

But reality finally intruded. His peace and solitude were destroyed by a detachment of sailors and rumors of a permanent military base. Eye disease forced him to the mainland for surgery; he returned despondent and antagonistic.

On June 18, 1942, Lester wrote a farewell letter to his wife, retreated to a favorite wilderness haunt, and was found dead. His family buried him at the spot, erected a small white monument, and left the island forever.

Today the island bears little resemblance to Never-Never Land. The relentless winds that shaped the coast into bizarre lime and sandstone friezes have taken over the inland, where flocks of overgrazing sheep have bared the soil.

Wildlife, however, still finds a haven on San Miguel. The island's 24-mile coastline abounds with colonies of seals and sea lions, with occasional visits from the southern sea otter. Only recently the rare fur seal established a breeding ground there. Zoologists regard the coastline as the most significant rookery of its kind in the United States.

San Miguel is currently under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Navy which has used the island as a target during air-to-surface missile testing. Opponents of the testing want the island set aside as a wildlife sanctuary to ensure that its rookeries are protected.

So far their efforts have met with bittersweet success. Though direct firing

was suspended in the early 1960s, testing has been resumed on offshore platforms. But the launches sometimes go awry, spraying a lethal sheet of shrapnel into wildlife colonies and igniting island brushfires.

Encouraged by a Department of Interior report that there is "nothing comparable along the entire Pacific coast in the way of maritime ecology... still relatively untouched," conservationists are fighting for national park status for five islands—Anacapa, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel. The Channel Islands far to the west, Santa Catalina, San Nicholas and San Clemente, are not included.

Congressional action on the park proposal has been painstakingly slow partly because there are many areas of the United States under consideration for park status, each with its own merits—from Florida's Big Cypress to Kansas prairie lands. But some conservationists charge that Congress is dragging its heels. Five bills relating to the Channel Islands went before the 92nd Congress at the end of its last session, four of them proposing feasibility studies on the prospects of a national park and the fifth seeking park status outright. None of the bills ever reached the floor for debate.

Park advocates have been plagued by obstacles ranging from public indifference to a determination among island owners to retain their land rights. If the islands could be purchased, the overwhelming cost presents still another

Giant coreopsis, a bizarre, ungainly cousin of the sunflower, brightens the otherwise barren landscape of Santa Barbara Island. In summer the plant droops listlessly. With the first rains it springs to sudden life, bursting with huge yellow blossoms visible from 30 miles at sea. **Overgrazing** in past years has denuded much of San Miguel's vegetation, and relentless gales have sculptured weird lime and sandstone creations across much of the barren soil, above. **Threatening** postures and kicking of sand by male elephant seals indicate a challenge for harem mastery on San Miguel Island.

stumbling block. Ronald Robinson, Channel Islands National Monument director, predicts the completed park would cost about \$50,000,000 (including development) under a unique compatibility plan in which the landowners would remain on their property with the National Park Service functioning as overseer.

While most conservationists herald the park proposal, skeptics warn that it would encourage novice yachtsmen to venture into an area of sudden, severe weather changes, and that the delicate island ecology could not sustain heavy tourism. For example, accidental fires would be extremely destructive to these dry, wind-swept islands. Some 15,000 persons already visit the existing national monument each year. Should the proposed five-island park become reality, that figure could soar to 400,000 by 1980.

Park proponents maintain that restricted recreation can be made compatible with island ecology, that resources can be preserved. Property owners insist the best policy for safeguarding the isles is to keep the public off. Everybody thinks he knows what is best for the Channel Islands. But who will save them? □

Vance H. Scott, overnight editor for KNXT/CBS News in Los Angeles, has been visiting the Channel Islands every summer since he was very young. He and photographer Bob Evans are preparing a pictorial history of the islands.





POST OFFICE BOX 435 PORT HUENEME CALIFORNIA 93041

August 17, 1973

Mr George H Harrison, Managing Editor
National Wildlife
534 North Broadway
Milwaukee
Wisconsin 53202

Dear Mr Harrison,

I was extremely disappointed at the gross inaccuracies in the article by Vance H Scott, Who Will Save Never-Never Land?, in the August-September, 1973, issue of National Wildlife. The photographs are beautiful, but the text is slanted and misleading. A number of things are quoted as fact which are simply not true, and a number of pertinent facts are not mentioned at all. The only person quoted is Donald M Robinson, Director of the Channel Islands National Monument. His name is misspelled in the article and his ideas are biased and not necessarily correct. None of the owners, who know more about the islands than any other living people, nor any of the many qualified scientists, who do and have done huge quantities of valid and valuable research, were interviewed. A fascinating and accurate article could have been done, rather than the popular and superficial one which was. None of the real sources were tapped at all.

It is sad that your magazine prints this kind of trash as truth, because a great many people reading it believe it and assume that some research has been done. In this case there was surely little done in the preparation of the article.

I have tried three times unsuccessfully to reach Mr Scott by telephone and so am sending him a copy of this letter.

Very truly yours,

Carey Stanton

Carey Stanton
SANTA CRUZ ISLAND COMPANY